

Values: "I'm the Expert Here"

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Background

My own background includes going to college rather late in life because of economic reasons. During the Second World War, I worked in the shipyards to earn enough money to go to college, and then my college work was interrupted several times because of financial demands made by my own family. However, I finally got a Bachelor of Arts degree, taught for several years while attending graduate school at night, and received the my master's degree after 6 years of struggle. At long last, I was appointed

a school counselor. I mention these items to indicate that I personally worked hard to get a professional education and to show that I believe that one should try hard to get ahead. Also, as a high school counselor, I have very often argued and pleaded with bright students who do not plan to go to college to do so, and I have helped several to find ways and means to get further education.

I believe that colleges should be training grounds for the intellectual elite, and not for everyone. Because half of the U.S. population has less-than-average academic aptitude, I believe that at least half of the population should not go to college. They will not get much out of it because college degrees will not mean much. Also, going to college for such kids is likely to be a disastrous experience. To put it simply, I think some kids should go to college whether or not they are interested or can afford it and some should not go to college. I believe that one of my functions, perhaps my main function, is to advise high school seniors and their parents about the wisdom of any child going to any college.

One of my counselees was Peter, who was below average in everything. We had complete records on him going back to kindergarten. He had taken about a dozen IQ tests and general academic aptitude tests over the years, as well as test of achievement, and not a single one of them showed he was above average. His grades were above average, however, which I assumed to be a function of his docility.

He was a good student who did what he was told and never got into trouble. He was a spiritless, mild, meek, and inadequate boy, with very little spunk, drive, or will. He always complied and tried his best, but his best was below average in every objective measurable respect. He had few friends and, to put it simply, he just existed. I had seen Peter several times on routine matters and found him to be more or less a lump. Whatever I would recommend, he would accept. He had no ideas of his own. His modal response to almost every question was to say, "Hudunno" (translated: "I don't know"). He was a scared rabbit of a boy.

The specific background relating to the incident has to do with a counseling session I had with Peter, which centered on what he should do when he graduated from high school. I asked him what

he intended to do, and I got one of his "Hudunno" sounds. I asked him what his parents wanted him to do and was told "college." Peter had a habit, incidentally, of answering questions with one key word. When I heard that he was being encouraged to go on to college, I was shaken. I knew that, given his level of knowledge, he did not even deserve a high school diploma. I was certain that any college would soon throw him out and that this event would be a traumatic experience. I was certain that his parents would be quite upset were he to go to college and not succeed. I felt it might also be quite a financial, as well as emotional, burden for all concerned.

I then told Peter he should think over carefully whether he really wanted to go beyond high school and to talk things over with his parents. I also told him to tell them I would be happy to talk with them about the matter. He seemed to understand. The next day his mother called and asked for an appointment. I set it for the first time I had available.

Incident

Both of Peter's parents came in, and the session started cordially enough. I told them I was interested in Peter and I felt the three of us should discuss what would be best for their son. I carefully went over Peter's tests and objective grades with them and interpreted his school grades. I then tried to explain to them what college was like. (Neither of the parents had gone to college, and there was none in this town.) I told them that, in my judgment, Peter had almost no chance to succeed in college and that going there would most likely be burdensome on them as well as possibly traumatic for Peter.

The father nodded from time to time in agreement with me, but the mother just glared at me, and I began to realize that she was upset. I continued, trying to be a neutral and yet as persuasive as I could, giving them all the information I had and trying to let them understand the whole matter from my point of view. I reminded them that this was "my opinion" and that the decision was "theirs" and that what was important was "Peter's welfare and happiness." But I felt I was not getting through to the mother. Finally, I finished and awaited their reaction.

The mother began to accuse me of not wanting Peter to go to college. She told me he had always wanted to go, and that when he had come home several nights before he was all shook up and disturbed about what I had told him. She said I had no right to say what I did. It was none of my business. My business was only to help him select the best college for him and not to influence his decision to attend college. This decision was the family's decision and not mine. Peter was now refusing to study or do his homework. He would do poorly on the finals because of my discussion with him. I had not encouraged him. Where there is a will there is a way. If he had good grades in high school, he would also have good grades in college. What did I know about tests anyway? Which were better indicators of college grades, tests or high school grades? Did only people with high IQ have a right to go to college? Was college not supposed to help someone use his talents as best he could? What should Peter do now? Become a linoleum layer like his father?

To the last question I answered, "What is wrong with being a linoleum layer?" Her answer shocked me: "Better he should be dead." I realized at this point that I was not dealing with a rational woman, but what made this a critical incident for me was her next statement and request. She had thought it all out clearly. "Peter has a right to go to college and try. My husband and I have worked hard and saved money for this. We want him to enjoy himself at college and get a chance to learn something which may help him in life. You have now discouraged him. I want you to call him in and undo the harm you have done. Tell him you were joking, tell him you were mistaken. Tell him anything, but get him motivated to pass his examinations as well as possible."

Shaken by this scene, which had gone so differently from how I expected, I looked at the father, who shrugged helplessly. "I think maybe you ought to do what she says. After all, she is the mother. Peter is our only son. We want what is best. Both of us think he should go. Maybe you ought to go along with her. I see your point. Maybe you are right. But he should get his chance. Otherwise she will always hate you."

The incident occurred for me then and there. I closed my eyes and thought carefully. I knew I was right, and I was positive the mother was wrong. I knew that Peter should not go to college. I could see the whole thing. My problem was what to do. Should I stick to my guns, tell them this was how I saw things, and that right or wrong I would do what I thought was right, that I was a professional person, hired by the city to give my judgment on academic-vocational matters? Or, should I do what I thought was unwise, go along with the ambitious but unrealistic mother, and thereby harm the child? I knew I really did not know what the right thing to do was, that the matter might be seen differently by different counselors. But I could not pass the buck to anyone else. My decision was to go along with the mother. I agreed, called in Peter the next day, and more or less said to him what his mother wanted.

Discussion

Peter did get into college, and at the end of the first semester returned home and entered his father's business. I called a faculty member at the college with whom I had considerable contact in placing students and asked for information about Peter. I was told he had not adjusted well, that his grades had been very poor, that he had been on academic probation, that my judgment had been faulty in recommending him to them. In the future, he indicated, he would be much more skeptical about my recommendations.

I explained the situation, and the faculty member stated he understood my problem and that this was a fairly common problem for high school counselors. Probably about all that could be done, he felt, was to go along with parents.

QUESTIONS

1. Should a counselor operate only as a technician, doing what the "clients" (i.e., students or parents) want, rather than as a professional doing what he or she thinks is right?
2. In this instance, what would you have done that I did not do? Try to get another professional opinion or try to argue and convince the mother and refuse to change my opinion?

3. How should one handle such problems? Should one just refuse to get involved? Would this not be malfeasance?

RESPONSES TO THE INCIDENT

Rudolf Dreikers

One can understand the difficulties of the counselor in this particular situation when one considers his background. He was very correct in providing it; it explains his utter blindness in regard to the damage he did, as a consequence of the high standards he had set for himself. Because he worked very hard to get his master's degree, he became an intellectual snob, looking down on those who did not come up to his standards.

Tied to this general attitude is his exaggerated opinion about the significance of a college degree. He really believes that college is for the intellectual elite, from which the rest should be excluded. First of all, there is often no correlation between a college degree and competence in the field. The degree is reserved for those who have the ability to pass examinations. And we are becoming aware that many students who do not qualify for college are much more successful, even intellectually, than those who are admitted on the strength of test scores. When less intelligent students are denied admission to college, it deprives them of the opportunity to obtain better jobs; many students want to go to college only because their financial prospects will be significantly improved. But all this information is, of course, beyond the grasp of the counselor, who is fascinated by the importance of intellectual superiority. Unfortunately, the student had to suffer for it.

The fact that Peter's grades were "above average" did not impress the counselor. He took the achievement test average as a basis for his assumption that this student was "below average." It is obvious the counselor did not like the student by the way he described him. It never occurred to him to understand Peter's handicap—his discouragement, particularly in dealing with a demanding "superior" which he, the counselor, was. For him, Peter's peculiar behavior was apparently a sign of intellectual inferiority. His anticipation of Peter's inevitable failure was a critical

variable and was much more harmful to Peter than the consequences of a certain college failure. It is obvious that Peter felt inadequate to meet demands, which may well explain his low performance on tests. Discouraged as the boy obviously was, the counselor did his best to discourage him further.

The interview that the counselor had with Peter's parents is a masterpiece of self-deception. The counselor was furious about what the parents, especially the mother, said and apparently was utterly unaware of what he himself did. It starts off with the statement that he tried to be as neutral as he could, while every act and sentence revealed his own prejudice against the boy and his reluctance to understand what the mother had to say. He stated that "the mother began to accuse me of not wanting Peter to go to college." For heaven's sake, was that not exactly what he tried to do? Then the mother described the boy's reaction after the counselor had told him he should not go to college, that "he was all shook up and disturbed." The counselor certainly was not disturbed by that, nor did he recognize the harm he had done to the boy who now refused to study or to do his homework. He could not see how correct the mother was in blaming him for the probability that the boy would do poorly in his finals as a result of the counselor's attack. She was justified in assuming that if the boy had good grades in high school, he may also have good grades in college.

But the counselor believed more in tests than in the actual performance of the boy. Peter's mother's evaluation of a college education was much more accurate than the distorted view of the counselor, when she said, "wasn't college to help anyone to use his talents as best he could?" Then the counselor even exceeded himself in his utter blindness to the situation. He was enraged that the mother did not want the son to become a linoleum layer like father. Why was the counselor not satisfied with working in the shipyards and instead worked so hard to get a college education? Was it not the same desire for higher status that motivated the mother? But the counselor could not see this issue.

In other words, it was not the mother who was irrational. She was correct in condemning the action of the counselor. The function of a counselor is to understand and to help, not to sit in judg-

ment and to condemn. A boy who can make above-average grades in high school is entitled to get a college education. It would be up to the counselor to reduce difficulties. Instead he discouraged Peter, not only in regard to a possible college education but in his functioning at the moment. The mother was justified in demanding that he undo the harm he did and to "get him motivated to pass his examinations as well as possible."

Where did the counselor go wrong? All his professional training did not provide him with the ability to size up the situation. We have seen many cases in which, on the basis of tests alone, faculty evaluations have been made, and students have been discouraged from going to college who, when they ignored the advice, have gone and succeeded, sometimes even with top grades. Conversely, students who have seemed to be eminently qualified for higher education have failed miserably.

In this sense, the counselor was a victim of a system that will be increasingly recognized as faulty and inadequate. He compounded his mistaken evaluation of the situation with his personal concern with the elite, with intellectual righteousness. For him the question was whether he was "right" or not, regardless of what happened to the student. His description of his interview with Peter's mother showed his blindness in regard to the role he played in the boy's life.

To answer his question—the counselor is not obligated to do what clients, students, or parents want; but he should use better judgment in dealing with a touchy situation. It is not enough that counselors do what they think is right; it is more important they have a better idea of what is right. Finally, his performance, beginning with his critical and contemptuous attitude toward Peter, was not professional but highly subjective and personal.

What could the counselor have done? First, he would have to deal with Peter's attitudes—his overambition on the one hand and his self-doubt expressed by his inadequate social adjustment on the other. After reconsidering these factors, he may have been better able to call Peter's attention to the risks of academic failure unless Peter learned to function more adequately in general. The counselor overlooked the specific problems of this student entirely and

merely acted on the basis of his psychometric findings. As long as our system produces counselors whose sole technique is to give and evaluate tests, such examples of an utterly inhuman approach to student counseling will continue to plague us.

Allen E. Ivey

The basic problem in this case lies not in the questions raised by the counselor at the close of the case but in the third paragraph, where his explicit statement of his own values makes clear his expectations of less-than-average students. We see here an intellectual elitism, a complete acceptance of the validity of tests and grades as the prime indicators of who should go to college (despite considerable evidence to the contrary), and a godlike attitude ("my main function [is] to advise high school seniors and their parents about the wisdom of any child going to college").

Until this counselor examines his own personal values and realizes the potential destruction that lies within them (Peter was "more or less a lump"), he will be of only minimal value to the students he serves. He will probably continue as the college "traffic cop" helping only the apparently bright and gifted individual to higher possibilities. Could it be conceivable that some of these individuals might be more effective salespeople than professionals?

A more open and encouraging posture to all students is required of the counselor. This does not mean the counselor should encourage Peter to go to college. Rather, it means the counselor should explore with Peter how he really feels about his future. Accepting the one-word answer "college" after "Hudunno" does not impress one as exploration, counseling, or perhaps even conversation.

In this case, it must be granted that the student perhaps has only minimal chance for success in college. A series of interviews might explore Peter's interest and future plans in some depth. It seems strange that no one ever really asked Peter what he wanted to do. The counselor should not neglect his values and opinions in this case, but there is no need to impose them on the student. The counselor might point out the problems inherent in college attendance, but he could also

indicate that individual differences and personal motivation determine eventual success. Peter then could take the data and use the information in his own decision-making process.

Peter and his counselor could explore alternatives to college and whether or not college was the right decision. The counselor could then meet with the parents with an informed sense of Peter's position. Some additional preparatory work with the parents might be useful before a final decision session. What are the parents' goals and aspirations? Have they fully considered alternatives? If college is the eventual decision, a variety of alternative institutions can be considered where Peter's chances for success are maximized. By careful choice of college and an honest, truthful admission recommendation, the counselor's problem with the college admissions office could have been avoided.

In short, if the counselor had known Peter as a person before the session with the parents, the confrontation with the mother might have been avoided and a more compatible decision for Peter, the family, and even the counselor might have resulted. Unfortunately, the counselor remained a prisoner of his own values and was unable to listen to or see the situation he encountered. This case illustrates a problem all too common in counseling. The focus here is not on the child but on wishes of the parents and the counselor.